

Wisconsin Whooping Crane Management Plan

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Please join me in celebrating a conservation success story. The whooping crane, once one of the rarest birds on the planet, is edging back from the brink of extinction and Wisconsin is playing a key and innovative role.

Thanks to the effort and cooperation of public agencies, private organizations and individuals, the whooping crane is well on its way to a successful reintroduction in Wisconsin. For the first time, whooping cranes reintroduced into the wild are migrating along their ancestral path between the Midwest and Florida. Once again Wisconsin's beautiful landscapes of rivers and wetlands are the home of North America's tallest bird.

This is a time of celebration for all citizens of Wisconsin as we look forward to hearing the call of these magnificent birds, and observe them taking wing over our beautiful state.

**Scott Hassett, Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources**

**Cover Photo Credit:
Arielle Shanahan
USFWS**

WISCONSIN WHOOPING CRANE MANAGEMENT PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The whooping crane (*Grus americana*) is one of two crane species native to North America, found in large, open wetland ecosystems. The only self-sustaining population of whooping cranes consists of less than 250 birds that breed in Canada and winter in Texas. Since 1999, Wisconsin has played a major role in efforts to restore a migratory whooping crane population in eastern North America, focused around a core breeding area in Wisconsin. There are now 63 wild whooping cranes (August 2006) in the restored Eastern Migratory Population from this effort, with plans for 25-30 birds to be added each year until the population becomes self-sustaining, perhaps by 2020. Already there are signs of success: spring 2006 marked the first Wisconsin hatched whooping cranes in over 100 years.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the whooping crane as threatened with extinction in 1967 and endangered in 1970. Canada designated the whooping crane as endangered in 1978. An International Whooping Crane Recovery Team (IWCRT) oversees recovery objectives and strategies.

The IWCRT charged members of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), a partnership with nine government and private sector organizations, with the mission of restoring a second self-sustaining migratory population. This management plan is intended to help achieve that mission and bring the whooping crane closer to delisting from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species. The plan is designed for Wisconsin but many elements are applicable to crane management throughout the flyway and are available for adoption by other jurisdictions.

For at least five more years, approximately 25 - 30 whooping crane chicks will be added annually to the Eastern Migratory Population. Chicks are supplied through captive breeding programs such as those at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland and the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin. The number of chicks available for the reintroduction program is limited by small facility capacity, staff funding, and weather-related events. Hopefully, as the population matures, additional chicks will result from successful nesting in Wisconsin's wetlands.

At five-year intervals (2011, 2016, etc.) a review of the whooping crane's population status and this plan should occur to identify opportunities, concerns, and support of whooping crane management. The body of this document may then be revised; the appendices may be more frequently revised and dated as needed. **To assure the sustainability of the population, the target 2020 interim goal is a MINIMUM population of 100 whooping cranes with 25 breeding pairs that regularly nest and fledge offspring, in conjunction with the same target numbers for an introduced Florida non-migratory population. If the Florida reintroduction effort is unsuccessful, the eastern migratory population minimum target becomes 120 whooping cranes with 30 breeding pairs that regularly nest and fledge offspring by 2020 (CWS & USFWS, 2006).**

The Wisconsin Whooping Crane Management Plan is a guidance tool specific to released and wild-hatched cranes for use by those individuals and groups charged with

maintaining habitat quality, assessing state population goals, monitoring and managing crane activities, addressing landowner needs, developing ecotourism opportunities, and educating the public. In this plan, management strategies and protocol recommendations have been developed to maintain a high level of protection and ensure future success of whooping cranes in Wisconsin, while considering the needs and interests of state citizens and communities.

By contributing to and applying information in this plan, WI DNR together with WCEP and the IWCRT will evaluate the reintroduction program and determine the level of success. Accordingly, the WI DNR Whooping Crane Coordinator confers monthly with other WCEP Project Direction Team members. Wisconsin DNR staff work with state citizens and federal and nongovernmental agencies to assess and manage habitat critical to the establishment and survival of a healthy population.

Whooping crane data are recorded, consistently formatted and used for the following:

1. Documenting bird location, health, behavior, habitat, and relocation needs
2. Analyzing pair formation and reproduction, behavior, and habitat use
3. Comparing release strategies and setting future population goals for Wisconsin
4. Evaluating genetic pedigree of chicks produced in the wild
5. Guiding land management, land acquisition, and public use decisions
6. Conducting environmental analyses for state and federal permit issuance
7. Preparing outreach, education, and funding proposals

Any wetland with minimal human disturbance, even small isolated wetlands, has potential for use by whooping cranes. However, it is expected that the locations of initial high concentration and nesting will occur in the primary rearing and release location of central Wisconsin: at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Juneau County and surrounding wetlands of Monroe, Jackson, Wood, Marathon, Adams, and Marquette Counties. (See Appendix 6 for observed whooping crane locations within each county.)

Between 2002 and 2005, cranes were observed in 32 of 72 Wisconsin counties, primarily along major rivers and wetlands. Whooping cranes depend on wetlands for nesting, chick rearing, safe roosting and feeding. Wisconsin encompasses almost 34.8 million acres, of which 5.3 million acres are wetlands; 4 million or 75.2 percent of wetlands are privately owned and managed (WI DNR, 2000). Clearly, wetland habitat restoration on private lands can significantly benefit whooping cranes. Data collected under this plan should help Federal, State and local planners in efforts to prioritize areas for restoration efforts that will benefit whooping cranes and the myriad of other wildlife that inhabits associated wetlands.

Since whooping cranes in Wisconsin are classified as a nonessential experimental population, routine and legal activities on private lands will not put private citizens in conflict with the law. As described in the federal rule announcing the designation of this whooping crane population, the normal Endangered Species Act penalties do not apply if the "take" of the species is incidental to a legal activity.

Whooping cranes can serve as a "flagship" species to educate Wisconsin's citizens and visitors about the importance of conserving both wetlands and the many species dependent on them, while also promoting other statewide conservation programs. The reintroduction of whooping cranes offers an excellent opportunity for the development of

an education and outreach program centering on crane biology and ecology, wildlife and landscape management and related environmental issues. Education and outreach efforts must involve a diversity of partners, audiences, and approaches.

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership hopes this plan will serve as a template for management plans in other eastern states and provinces as needed. This document is a result of extensive WCEP collaboration between public and private partners.